



Health Facts: *Heart Disease*

Overview

Heart disease starts with a buildup of “plaque” in the blood vessels, and if untreated, can lead to heart attacks. According to the American Heart Association (AHA), coronary heart disease is the single leading cause of death for American women.

Symptoms

The symptoms of heart disease are often silent, though if a blood clot narrows the opening to an artery, you may feel chest pain, or angina. If blood flow is nearly or completely blocked, you may have a heart attack. Heart attack symptoms may not be sudden or dramatic like in the movies, so don't wait until symptoms are severe or unbearable. The warning signs of a heart attack are:

- Discomfort that spreads from the chest to the shoulders, neck and arms
- Pressure or squeezing pain in the chest that may spread into the neck, shoulders and arms
- Nausea, breathlessness, sweating or fainting with pain in the arms, chest or neck
- Feelings of impending doom
- Significant fatigue
- Indigestion
- Weakness in the arms

Facts to Know

The American Heart Association reports that 23 percent of women age 40 and older will die within a year of a heart attack, compared with only 18 percent of men. Women's heart attack symptoms often are milder and less specific than men's, so some women fail to get treatment as quickly as men.

Coronary heart disease (CHD) is a disease of the heart's blood vessels that, if untreated, can cause heart attacks. Like any muscle, the heart needs a constant supply of oxygen and nutrients, which are carried to it by the blood in the coronary arteries. When the coronary arteries become narrowed or clogged and cannot supply enough blood to the heart, CHD results.

Major risk factors for coronary artery disease include smoking, elevated blood pressure, excessive alcohol intake and obesity. Some forms of menopausal hormone therapy also may increase a woman's risk of cardiovascular disease, especially if started long after menopause.

African-American women are more likely to die of CHD than Caucasian women. African-American women have greater incidence of high blood pressure and diabetes, both of which increase the risk of heart disease. They are more likely to die from stroke and heart attacks than Caucasian women. Heart disease risk is also higher among Mexican Americans, Native Americans and native Hawaiians. This is partly due to higher rates of obesity and diabetes in these ethnic groups.

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